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Intelligence Memorandum

THE BIAFRAN RELIEF PROBLEM

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
29 January 1969

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Biafran Relief Problem

Summary

Biafran relief has become a charged international issue that could severely strain and possibly rupture US-Nigerian relations. There is very little reliable information on the actual number of refugees or on the rate of starvation in Biafra, but it does appear that the situation will worsen within the next few months. The plight of the refugees has not had any significant effect on the policies of either side in the civil war, but the Biafrans use it for propaganda purposes, and at least some Nigerians favor starving the Biafrans into submission as the best war policy.

As the war drags on, the federal authorities will probably become increasingly suspicious of foreign involvement in Biafran relief, and may feel compelled to react strongly against foreign countries backing stepped-up relief to the secessionists. Violent anti-US demonstrations could also occur.

Note: This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated with the Office of Economic Research, the Office of National Estimates, and the Clandestine Services.

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The Seriousness of the Food Problem

1. The area now under Biafran control is approximately one fourth that of the former Eastern Region which Colonel Ojukwu led into secession in May 1967. As a result of the Ibo exodus into Biafran-controlled territory as federal forces advanced, the population in present-day Biafra has increased from a prewar four million to somewhere between six and seven million. Even before the civil war this particular section of the Eastern Region was a densely populated area dependent on imported food.

2. There is unquestionably starvation in the Biafran-controlled area and in the areas of the former Eastern Region overrun by federal forces. The number of deaths from starvation appears to have risen sharply during the period from last July through October. Deaths probably numbered in the hundreds of thousands, but accurate figures are not available. These deaths presumably occurred mostly among the very old, the young, and the sick. After October there was an apparent decline in deaths from starvation probably because of an improvement in the food distribution system, the increased airlift of food by relief organizations, and the fact that the main yam harvest occurred at this time.

3. Forecasts on the seriousness of the starvation problem in the coming months range from a relatively low death rate to those predicting mass starvation. The US Embassy in Lagos has estimated that by July some 3.5 million Biafrans and some 2.25 million refugees in federal-held territory will be in need of food. Should the direst predictions regarding the food situation materialize and the worst circumstances prevail, some two to three million people in Biafra and in the federally occupied areas could die of starvation in the next few months. It does not appear that death from starvation will be anywhere near this serious, however. Moreover, a real if unmeasurable consideration in any such estimate is the Biafrans' ability to cope with the problem themselves. Colonel Ojukwu recently launched another campaign to increase food production, and it must be assumed that the Biafrans will turn their considerable ingenuity toward alleviating the problem.

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Sources of Assistance

4. Relief to the Biafrans has come mainly from Joint Church Aid (JCA), an association of religious relief agencies operating from the Portuguese island of Sao Tome off the coast of Nigeria, and until early this month from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) based in neighboring Equatorial Guinea. The unofficial Catholic charity organization, Caritas, has also sent some relief supplies from Sao Tome, and the French Red Cross operates relief flights from Libreville.

5. The ICRC operation was suspended early this month by the government of newly independent Equatorial Guinea for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the unstable situation that prevails in this tiny former Spanish dependency. There is a large Ibo work force on Fernando Po, which the government of Equatorial Guinea fears is bent on subversion. Equatorial Guinea also believes it is under pressure by its much larger neighbor and has come down firmly on the side of Nigeria over the Biafran question. When the territory was under Spanish control, the ICRC operation worked smoothly. After independence last October, however, tension developed between ICRC officials and the Equatorial Guineans who have described the relief workers as arrogant and disrespectful of Equatorial Guinea's sovereignty. Equatorial Guinean Government officials have also indicated that they are receiving much less financial compensation for the ICRC operation than the Spanish did. Foreign Minister Ndongo has indicated that his country would consider reopening the airlift if the proper financial compensation were forthcoming. It is by no means certain, however, that he was speaking for his government, particularly the highly volatile President Macias, who has publicly committed himself not to permit ICRC night flights and who seems bent on using this issue to underscore Equatorial Guinea's independent status.

6. All relief flights by the JCA and ICRC have been made at night. The Biafrans refuse to open their one operating airstrip to day flights, fearing that the Nigerians would use this opportunity to land troops on the airstrip. Also, the Biafrans want to continue night relief flights as a cover for separate arms

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flights. The ICRC had been transporting approximately 80 tons of relief supplies per night to the Biafrans, while the JCA is presently carrying about 100 tons of relief supplies nightly.

Nigerian Attitudes on Relief

7. Nigeria has reluctantly accepted the need for foreign participation in the Biafran relief effort, but Lagos has always been suspicious of the activities of the foreign relief agencies involved. Lagos would prefer that all relief be channeled through Nigeria, and, ideally, through Nigerian relief organizations. The federal authorities tacitly sanctioned the principle of daylight flights by the ICRC from Equatorial Guinea, but have never given their approval for night flights. Indeed, last November Lagos implied that planes flying into Biafra at night risked being shot down.

8. The Nigerians object strongly to the JCA operation from Sao Tome, and with some justification. The JCA has completely bypassed Lagos in its operations, and arms are also being flown to the secessionists from Sao Tome. The same airplanes have been used for arms and relief flights, and it seems probable, although there is no definite evidence, that some of the planes have carried mixed cargoes. The JCA officials are definitely pro-Biafran and have not been too discreet about expressing these sympathies publicly.

The Biafran Viewpoint

9. The Biafrans have said that they welcome relief from any donors, except Nigeria, the UK, and the USSR--the "unholy alliance" which the Biafrans are convinced is bent on the extermination of the Ibos. The Biafran insistence that relief not be channeled through Lagos results from the secessionists' unwillingness to appear dependent on Nigeria for anything, on a genuine fear that Lagos would poison the food, and on the probably justifiable fear that Nigeria would use relief supply channels, such as a land relief corridor from Nigeria to Biafra, for military purposes. The Biafrans have done all they can to alleviate the refugee and starvation problems, but the secessionist leadership has given no indication--even during the July-

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October period--of being moved by the problem to a more compromising position with respect to the secession issue.

Prospects

10. As the war drags on, with a probable increase in starvation, the Nigerians are likely to become even more sensitive to "foreign meddling" over the relief issue. Some Nigerian leaders regard starvation as a legitimate weapon of war and see aid to the Biafrans as merely prolonging the fighting. Most Nigerians, and at least some federal leaders, regard foreign relief to Biafra as direct support to the secessionists in an attempt to Balkanize Nigeria. The strong adverse reaction that greeted the announcement in December that the US was furnishing C-97 aircraft--four to the ICRC and four to the JCA--provides evidence of the Nigerian attitude on this matter.

11. Federal leader Gowon himself probably understands the US position on relief, but he has made clear to the US ambassador that the Nigerian people regard it as aid and comfort to the enemy. US efforts to reopen the ICRC's operation from Fernando Po have resulted in a definite increase in anti-US sentiment in Nigeria. The Nigerians recently leaked to the press a US note strongly urging--Lagos termed it demanding--the resumption of the airlift. In the Nigerian press and radio, the fact that US Secretary Rogers held his first official meeting with the Equatorial Guinean foreign minister was portrayed as further evidence of a change in US policy on Nigeria.

12. Official Nigerian reaction to US efforts to increase relief to Biafra has thus far been confined to verbal expressions of displeasure. There has been stinging criticism of the US in the Nigerian press and radio, and some anti-US demonstrations have been held. It would seem likely that as the war continues, further efforts by the US on behalf of Biafran relief will provoke a dramatic increase in anti-US sentiment in Nigeria. This in turn would increase pressure on federal leaders to take strong official action against the US. In the highly charged atmosphere in Nigeria, further

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US efforts for stepped-up Biafran relief could also easily spark violent anti-US demonstrations that could threaten some of the 5,200 US citizens now resident in Nigeria.